



Commodities

So far in this course we have had a [general introduction](#), and then looked at Marx’s 1847 “[Wage Labour and Capital](#)”, the “[Communist Manifesto](#)” of 1848, and Marx’s 1865 “[Value, Price and Profit](#)”.

Now, and for the remaining eight parts, this course will use text from Marx’s greatest single work: Capital, Volume 1. We will take nearly all of it, conveniently divided, in sequence, starting with Chapter 1 – Commodities (download linked below).

[Chapter 1 of Capital Volume 1 of Marx’s Capital](#) (attached) is a text that has been the material for many a political school. It begins with this great definition of commodities:

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities,’ its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of a commodity.

“A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.”

And it later says:

“A use-value, or useful article, therefore, has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it.”

Bourgeois and Proletarians

“Bourgeois and Proletarians” is the first of the four parts of the [Communist Manifesto](#), commissioned by the Communist League, written in London by Karl Marx, at the age of 29, with the help of his then 27-year-old friend Frederick Engels, and published in January, 1848.

Marx and Engels were under pressure from the Communist League to get this job done quickly. The brief was as difficult as it could be: to produce a short, emphatic, unambiguous, motivational description of historic processes, and to announce a credible determination to change the world under the leadership of the most exploited class of people, the working class, also known as the proletariat.

Marx and Engels were convinced that the new masters, the capitalists, also known as burghers, or burgesses, or bourgeoisie, that had grown up in the towns under feudal rule, were sooner or later going to be overthrown by the proletariat that the bourgeoisie had brought into existence.

Marx fell behind the agreed deadline for the Manifesto, but came through with a magnificent text just a few weeks before the February, 1848 events in Paris that brought the proletariat on to the stage of history to an extent that had not previously been seen in the world.

The timing was great, and the text turned out to be classic to the extent that every line of it is memorable, especially in this first part. It is so rich and so compressed as to be saturated with meaning, and practically impossible to summarise. Therefore let us simply quote some of the most extraordinary sentences, so as to encourage you to read the document, not once but many times:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other - bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.

All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.

Proletarians and Communists

We only need one text for one discussion per week, but the Communist University always gives alternatives, which can also be used for supplementary reading. Yesterday we took the first part of the [Communist Manifesto](#). Here is the second part, called [Proletarians and Communists](#).

As with the first part of this highly-concentrated piece of writing, the simplest way to present it is with selected quotes. Here are some:

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.

They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.

They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only:

(1) In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.

(2) In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

On ideas, and on the struggle of ideas, it says, among other things:

The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

When people speak of the ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.

The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs.

But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves

within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.

The communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional relations; no wonder that its development involved the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.

Finally, the Manifesto arrives, at the end of the second part, at the following tremendous vision of communism as the purest possible kind of human freedom:

Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat... by means of a revolution, makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.

In the fourth part, under “Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties” the final words of the Communist Manifesto are as follows:

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time.

Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

Labour Power

Chapter 6 of Capital, Volume 1 is where **Karl Marx** pops out the secret of the whole deal – the **Buying and Selling of Labour Power**. The “*Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta*” finishing the previous chapter was fair warning: This is it. This is the heart of the matter.

Here are some highlights:

“In order to be able to extract value from the consumption of a commodity, our friend, Moneybags, must be so lucky as to find, within the sphere of circulation, in the market, a commodity, whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption, therefore, is itself an embodiment of labour, and, consequently, a creation of value..

“By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description.

“...The second essential condition to the owner of money finding labour-power in the market as a commodity is this — that the labourer instead of being in the position to sell commodities in which his labour is incorporated, must be obliged to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power, which exists only in his living self.

“...For the conversion of his money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power.”

The first three paragraphs on page 3 of the downloadable extract linked below are also crucial, and are very surprising at the first reading. And then:

“...Accompanied by Mr. Moneybags and by the possessor of labour-power, we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face ‘No admittance except on business.’ Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making.

*“He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, **like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but — a hiding.**”*



Increase in value

Surplus Value

In Chapter 6 we discovered the mechanism of Surplus-Value, consequent upon the buying and selling of Labour Power, and subsequent extraction of labour, by which the overall increase in wealth, that takes place under capitalism, is achieved.

Chapter 7 begins with a short summary of the book thus far, as follows:

"The capitalist buys labour-power in order to use it; and labour-power in use is labour itself. The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work. By working, the latter becomes actually, what before he only was potentially, labour-power in action, a labourer."

The production of surplus value in the dynamic relationship between the capitalist and the working proletariat provides the answer to the question that the book is intended to answer, before any other:

Where does the wealth generated by capital come from?

Or, How, precisely, and exactly where, is the surplus taken?

Or, using Marx's words:

What is the secret of the self-increase of capital?

For, early on in his deliberations, Marx had determined that the observed general increase of wealth under capitalism could not have been coming from overcharging (cheating) in trade, because in a market of pure trading, one person's loss is another's gain, and all such losses and gains cancel out in any general summing up of wealth.

The answer is that the surplus arises in the workplace, and not in the market place, and the only source of surplus is this: that a worker can give up more in the fruits of his labour than it costs to develop and to maintain his labour-power.

This applies equally as much to women as to men.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from this is that capitalists make their money from employing people. It is the people that they employ, and not the machinery that the workers use, that makes the money. Therefore the bosses' threat to sack all the people and to substitute them all with machinery is always to that extent, a hollow threat.

The potential workers will get paid for what they are (i.e. for the labour that went into their existence) in full. But once inside the door, all the labour that they give, and all of the fruits of that labour, will belong to the capitalist.

Human beings can give up more labour than went into their own creation. This is the special characteristic of labour, which is different in this respect to all other inputs. It is this characteristic that the capitalist exploits, and it explains how the capitalist surplus is made.

Machiavelli

The Prince

Like the communists of today, [Niccolò Machiavelli](#) cultivated "long experience in contemporary affairs and a continual study of antiquity". Both Machiavelli and Marx were familiar with the politics of ancient Greece and Rome.

Machiavelli's "Prince" was written about 500 years ago, in Florence, Italy, and published in 1512. According to Karl Marx the sixteenth century was when capitalism first arose on the earth, especially in the Netherlands and in England, but it was Italy that had the most developed political culture at that time.

Hence "[The Prince](#)" appeared much earlier than the first writings on Political Economy such as those by [Thomas Hobbes](#), [William Petty](#) and [Nicholas Barbon](#), which appeared between 1650 and 1700. Karl Marx was familiar with all of these, while Machiavelli's work has been foundational for politicians throughout the five centuries of its existence.

[Machiavelli](#) was needing employment when he wrote this user-friendly text for the 20-year-old Florentine prince [Lorenzo di Piero De' Medici](#), in the hope that the young man would give Machiavelli a job as a consultant, *consigliere*, or something of that sort. No job resulted for Machiavelli but what he left us as a result of this attempt was a set of “short texts” of very frank and still-useful political education, not very different in conception from a Communist University “[Generic Course](#)”.

The chapter in this selection of four that corresponds most closely to the politics of today is Chapter IX, “Concerning a Civil Principality”. All of them are very interesting and all contain advice that is still good after 500 years. Our discussion should be about this advice. If people have not read the material in advance, one chapter could be selected and read out loud. The chapters are very short, but powerful. Machiavelli had a good basic understanding of class politics.

Socialism, Utopian and Scientific

The main downloadable linked text below is “[Socialism, Utopian and Scientific](#)”, by Frederick Engels.

By Utopian, Engels meant imaginary, or ideal, and typical of the early socialists such as [Robert Owen](#), [Henri de Saint-Simon](#), and [François Fourier](#) (who was the historical inventor of the word “feminism”, among other things). Marx and Engels respected these pioneers but also distinguished themselves critically from them. The third part of the third section of the Communist Manifesto of 1848 is devoted to them.

Frederick Engels begins “Socialism, Utopian and Scientific” (see the link below), with the [Great French Revolution](#) that started in 1789. From this point on we can meet, in their developed form, the class protagonists who allied and clashed from that time onwards until now, in all possible permutations: alliances holy and unholy, strategic and tactical, marriages of convenience and marriages made in heaven.

These classes were the feudal aristocrats; the peasants; the bourgeoisie; and the proletariat.

Engels’ work has the additional benefit of introducing the rudiments of political philosophy, and leading our thoughts towards the “democratic bourgeois republic”, which is at one and the same time the highest form of political life before socialism, the prerequisite of concerted proletarian action, and a form of the State that has to be achieved, transcended and then left behind.

Value, Price and Profit

By 1865 **Karl Marx** had solved the theoretical problems of his work on Surplus Value, "Capital". In that year he gave the well-known address to a gathering of worker-leaders of the First International, which was in danger of falling apart very soon after it was founded. That address afterwards became a popular publication under the name "[Value, Price and Profit](#)". The first volume of "Capital" was published two years later.

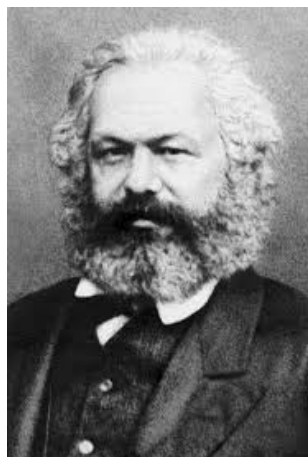
This short book has served the labour movement well. Among other things, it debunks the argument, still attempted by employers and their apologists in South Africa today, that wage rises will cause unemployment (or that wage drops will cause employment, for that matter).

The book shows how commodities, including commodity Labour-Power, are normally sold at their full value, and yet how, at the same time, the worker is getting swindled every day. It explains this apparent paradox, whereby the employer pays in full, yet somehow gets more than what he paid for; and this is the secret of the self-increase of capital.

It encourages workers to struggle for better wages and conditions, but it also (prefiguring Lenin's argument against "Economism" four decades later in "[What is to be Done?](#)") shows clearly why trade unionism, without separate political organisation, will never succeed in throwing off the yoke of capital.

Note the last part of Value, Price and Profit:

"...the working class... ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the *material conditions* and the *social forms* necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the *conservative* motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!" they ought to inscribe on their banner the *revolutionary* watchword, "Abolition of the wages system!"



Syndicalism

Demagogues are the worst enemies of the working class, wrote Lenin, in "[What is to be Done?](#)" In this book Lenin was concerned to oppose what he called "economism", which is also called "syndicalism" and in South Africa to this day, "workerism".

Lenin was concerned to show (following the publication of Eduard Bernstein's gradualist "[Evolutionary Socialism](#)" and Rosa Luxemburg's "[Reform or Revolution?](#)") that a revolutionary transformation of society was not possible without a professional, revolutionary, political party of the working class. Trade union organisation of the working class was never going to be sufficient.

In the process Lenin was moved to denounce demagogy in the severest terms. One reason for this is because the demagogues misrepresent themselves as being "left", or revolutionary, when in fact they are "right", and in particular gradualist, reformist and class-collaborationist.

Sometimes syndicalism arrives at a point where it proposes, demagogically, "worker's control" under capitalism. Marx and Lenin both denounced such tomfoolery – see, for example, Marx's "[Critique of the Gotha Programme](#)"

Lenin showed that the worker's political party, the communist party, remains a "must-have". To achieve its goals, the working class must combine in a vast association of the whole nation; whereas the syndicalism of individual factories or isolated mines is nothing more than a reversion to petty-bourgeois consciousness, in conditions where such behaviour is hopelessly subordinated to a bourgeois market that it cannot control.

How will they sell their products, unless on the terms of the Imperialists? This is why we say that demagogy is nothing but the class enemy's message, dressed up and re-sold in fake-revolutionary clothes. Demagogues will even be found denouncing the real revolutionaries as fakes.

When in doubt about such things, it helps to study; and Lenin is a good person to study, because he was good at telling the difference between genuine things, and fakes. Especially, Lenin opposed syndicalism, workerism, gradualism, reformism and economism, all of which still exist today.

"What is to be Done?" is the book where Lenin most clearly differentiated the reformist mass organisations from the vanguard political party of the working class, which is the communist party.

SACP Constitution

The jewel of the [SACP Constitution](#) is **Rule 6.4**, which says:

“Members active in fraternal organisations or in any sector of the mass movement have a duty to set an example of loyalty, hard work and zeal in the performance of their duties and shall be bound by the discipline and decisions of such organisations and movement.

“They shall not create or participate in SACP caucuses within such organisations and movements designed to influence either elections or policies.

“The advocacy of SACP policy on any question relating to the internal affairs of any such organisations or movements shall be by open public statements or at joint meetings between representatives of the SACP and such organisations or movements.”

This means that SACP members active in any part of the mass movement, including trade unions, and including the ANC, do so in the utmost good faith.

SACP members serve the mass organisations on the terms of those organisations.

This clause is the backbone of the Alliance of the SACP with the ANC and COSATU, including COSATU’s affiliates.

It is because the mass organisations understand this rule that the alliance has been so solid for so long. It means that SACP members can be trusted, and are in fact trusted.

The SACP Constitution, as a whole, is a model of how a constitution needs to be written. It is as brief as it can be, as direct as it can be, and where necessary it is sufficiently detailed. It is a very fine document, of which SACP Party members can be justly proud.

Mastering the SACP Constitution

The last three pages are on disciplinary and amendments procedure (Clauses 24 and 25). Clauses 8 to 23, roughly eleven in total, and therefore more than half of the entire constitution, are taken up with the structures of the Party from the National Congress down to Branches and Units. All of these are straightforward and easy to understand.

Clauses 1 and 2 have to do with the name, symbol and flag. Clause 7 establishes the Young communist League, in very few words.

Clauses, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are where you will find the distinguishing features of the Party.

SA Working Class and the NDR

In the beginning of 1976, the document "[The Enemy Hidden Under the Same Colour](#)" was published following the treachery and the consequent expulsion from the ANC of the "Gang of Eight".

Later the same year the "Soweto uprising" of youth began and spread all over the country.

Trade Unionism re-expanded from the early 1970s with strike waves in Durban and in the Witwatersrand where the watershed Carletonville Massacre took place in 1973. FOSATU, a syndicalist-led federation, was formed in 1979. It gave way to the National Democratic Revolutionary Alliance-aligned COSATU in 1985. The United Democratic Front was launched in 1983.

All of these activities, amounting to the creation of living, democratic structures on a national scale, typify the National Democratic Revolution. They showed precisely how organisation into democratic structures formed the relentless collective Subject of History that then became impossible to resist.

Joe Slovo published "[The SA Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution](#)" in 1988 at a time when he was the General Secretary of the SACP. The Party was still clandestine; the end of its 40-year period of enforced illegality was to come two years later. Like many political documents, this one takes shape around a polemical response to contemporary opponents who may no longer be well remembered. In this case it was the particular "workerists" and compromisers of the time that Slovo mentions on the first page of the document.

But as with the polemics of Marx, Engels and Lenin, in the course of the argument against otherwise long-forgotten foes, Slovo was obliged to set up a fully concrete, rounded assessment of the meaning of the NDR, which still remains today as the best single and definitive text on this matter; he succeeded brilliantly.

Slovo quickly establishes the class-alliance basis of the NDR and quotes Lenin saying that: *"the advanced class ... should fight with... energy and enthusiasm for the cause of the whole people, at the head of the whole people"*. This advanced class is the working class.

Slovo goes on to write of the continuity of the NDR, and of the institutional organising work that produces the bricks-and-mortar of nation-building.